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The Appeal of the Past: Retro Type and Typography

Teresa Breathnach

Brenda Dermody

Technological University Dublin, Brenda.Dermody@tudublin.ie

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The Appeal of the Past: Retro Type and Typography *Dr Teresa Breathnach and Brenda Dermody* Samuel Butler, an early twentieth century novelist, proclaimed that “the history of art is the history of revivals.”¹ At the beginning of the twenty-first century, one can argue that an alternative history of design also might be written through the lens of revivalism. The term ‘retro’ has been in use since the 1970s to describe the appropriation of historical forms in design.² What is more, rather than falling in and out of favour, it seems to have become an ever-present feature of typography, graphic design and the cultural scene generally. As such, it deserves due consideration. In surveying some retro type and typography, we aim to suggest a blue-print for a closer study of the field. During the 1980s and 90s, work produced in this vein often attracted

³¹ Teresa Breathnach, Brenda Dermody, *The Appeal of the Past: Retro Type and Typography*

1. Butler, S. *Notebooks*, (London: A.C. Fifield, 1912).

2. Woodham, J. M. *A Dictionary of Modern Design*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2 – 4), *Twentieth Century Design*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

3. Savage, J. 'The Age of Plunder,' *The Face* 33, (January) 1983. Kalman, T. et al. 'Good History/Bad History,' in Bierut, M. ed. *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, Volume 1, (New York: Alworth Press/AIGA, 1991).

4. Samuels, R., *Theatres of Memory*, (London: Verso, 1994). Heward, T. 'Revivalism and Cultural Shift: British Graphic Design since 1945,' *Design Issues* 15, no. 3, 1999. Kwint et al, *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*, (Oxford: Berg, 1999). Jens, H. 'Sixties Dress Only! The Consumption of the Past in a Retro Scene,' Palmer, A., Clark, H. eds. *Old Clothes, New Looks: Second Hand Fashion*, (Oxford: Berg, 2005). Guffey, E. E. *Retro: The Culture of Revival*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).

5. Samuels, *Theatres of Memory*, 307.

6. Ibid. viii.

7 Lowenthal, D. *The Past is a Foreign Country*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 241.

Opposite and previous: Base, Belgian National Theatre poster, detail. Client: Belgian National Theatre.

criticism as did the rise of the heritage industry and a general move towards nostalgia amongst consumers. Critics argued that it demonstrated a postmodern lack of attachment to the past, and criticized its treatment as a menu of styles or experiences that simply answered a desire for both playful novelty and a retreat from the present.³ But there also has been growing interest in the study of revivalism and of how people might engage with the past in everyday life through visual and material culture.⁴ In response to what he described as the “heritage baiters,” Raphael Samuels wrote of this engagement across all sorts of arenas including film, photographs, old buildings, artefacts and retro-chic.⁵ This paper regards retro type and typography as one such “theatre of memory.”⁶

Our intention here is to present some of the strands that make up this genre and to indicate how one might interpret them. David Lowenthal, in his seminal *The Past is a Foreign Country*, outlined how ageing, anachronism and embellishment—or what we might refer to as style in reference to typography—are the factors that alert us to the temporal quality of the things around us.⁷ Often all of these categories are intertwined. They have provided the structure for this paper which we hope will form the basis of a framework for future empirical work. The first section looks at style as a marker of retro typography. The second considers how designers use the material qualities of objects to create a sense of the past.

One of the principal features of contemporary design is a postmodern plurality of styles. It is no surprise then that the quotation of historical style and an interest in vernacular forms are the most frequently cited markers of retro design. Our intention here cannot be to give a detailed analysis of each and every style used in retro, but to give a sense of the breadth of inspiration that designers and typographers now take from some of these styles.

It is the modern and futuristic styles of typography of the mid- to late-twentieth century that have been most often associated with retro as a genre. Adelita, designed by Laura Meseguer and Adela de Bara, is strongly inspired by lettering of the 1950s and 1960s and the work of Miró and Alexander Calder. It recalls the popularity of molecular structures in 1950s design and more particularly the optimism in scientific discovery and in the future that followed the Second World War. The inspiration for the Art Deco



Opposite: *The Designers
Republic, Towa Tei/Best.*
Client: *East West Japan*

influenced typeface Orion MD by Michael Doret was a 1930s baked enamel sign uncovered by the designer at a Parisian flea market. His research into lettering from the period turned up a few examples that had a similar feel but none that looked quite like the characters on the sign and he used these to create the typeface. Base Design's poster for the reopening of the Belgian National Theatre draws from 19th century typography combining early display faces with those evocative of 1920s Broadway. In recent years there has been a surge of interest in design from the 60s, 70s and 80s. Tweedo by Malone Design is a general referencing of 60s modular design that draws on the energy and excitement about new materials that was apparent at that time. The Designer's Republic aimed to introduce a sense of the handmade in the transfer sheet that accompanied the CD packaging for Japanese music artist Towa Tei. The patterns and motifs are strongly evocative of the 1960s and 1970s when Letraset was widely used as a design tool. Billie Jean's ad for Nike contains references to pop culture and computer games from the 70s and eighties.

This selection of work suggests that there is now a widening range of styles that are encompassed by retro type and typography. These include the early, mid and late twentieth century styles often associated with retro as a genre, as well as an eclectic selection of nineteenth-century examples and processes. Clearly, an initial focus on the revival of early to mid-twentieth styles has expanded to encompass periods before and after this. It is also evident that the boundaries of retro typography have embraced media other than print.

Parody is another well-established aspect of retro design. Mark Denton's promotional mailer for calligrapher Alison Carmichael uses parody to make a strong point in relation to the application of hand-lettering in graphic design. The finished piece was rendered in a style drawn from examples of 1950s lettering and produced as a limited edition screen-print. Grot No. 9 and Bodoni bold were chosen to contrast with the more florid and delicate expletive again inspired by examples from early 1950s specimen books. Another example of parody by DDFH&B adopts the medium of a needle-work sampler in their advert for the Irish National Lottery. In this they make a humorous statement on the relationship between Irish mothers and



Design: Mark Denton,
Promotional mailer
Lettering: Alison
Carmichael. Client:
Alison Carmichael

their offspring. Parody here functions in the tension between the apparent authenticity of the work and the reader's realisation of what is actually being said. This may represent a distancing from the past, rather than the creation of an ever-present yesteryear. This type of work operates on the basis of challenging the pre-conceptions of the audience, requiring them to look beyond the comfortable experience that the style of the work initially presents. The designer relies on the knowing participation of the consumer for the punch line to be effective.

Retro styles are also bound up in particular places or cultures, as well as time periods, and their meanings vary depending on one's own cultural experiences. Globalisation, of course, has had a major impact on the meanings we ascribe to style. Although Michael Doret had used American style script lettering for many years, it was the discovery of OpenType that inspired him to develop it into the Metroscript typeface which includes a suite of add on tails and swashes. It is an amalgamation of a number of different popular hand-lettered styles from the 1920s to the 1950s, known as a 'baseball' or 'sports script' in the US because it was widely used for sporting typography there. Words set in Metroscript then are often suggestive of this, and for many, a wider sense of small town America, an image rooted in depictions with a long history in popular culture—a global image before globalisation was discussed. One can't help but feel that the effects of globalisation have to underpin the assertion of the local in Mucca's identity for Schiller's Liquor Bar. Schiller's is one of a number of restaurants in Manhattan established by Keith McNally, a successful New York restaurateur. He has a very strong vision in terms of the design of his bars and restaurants and retro design is at the heart of this. In *New York Magazine* (28 February 2010) Benjamin Wallace describes how McNally's establishments are "Meticulously engineered to feel like found objects excavated from a golden past that never was, his places are augmented-reality versions of the bistro, the brasserie, the trattoria, the café, the tavern." Schiller's aimed to reflect a lower East side, New York neighbourhood bar appeal using a mixture of fact and fable—for example, the name *Schiller's* was familiar in the area, but as a long established butcher shop in a nearby market, not a bar. Hand-drawn, stamped, stencilled and calligraphic



WORDS LOOK MUCH NICER WHEN THEY'RE HAND LETTERED



Mucca Design, Schiller's
Liquor Bar. Client: Schiller's
Liquor Bar,

typography are applied across all aspects of the identity. Mucca worked with a calligrapher to create a signature-style logo, which was then translated into a neon sign on the façade to help integrate it with the surrounding streetscape. For the menus they designed the typeface Francesco, inspired by handwritten signs collected from restaurants in Italy. Again, OpenType facilitated the creation of a set of variants for each of the characters which randomly change to more closely emulate handwritten text. Tibor Kalman looked to a similar vernacular vocabulary in the 1990s in his solution for Florent Restaurant, also in New York. For Kalman, this was a bid to counteract the slickness of corporate design. Despite the concept being rooted in the history of the area, and in particular its Russian Jewish history, one might argue that Schiller's is simply one of a whole plethora of establishments that sell themselves as something they are not—an essentially inauthentic experience akin perhaps to some of the offerings of the heritage industry. Alternatively, typography at Schiller's may also be experienced by the consumer as a means to express the need to belong to a local community rooted in history, tradition and place.

The identity for Sant Ambroeus, an upmarket Milanese restaurant brand dating back to the 1930s was repositioned by Mucca Design for a New York audience. Mucca Design retained the cloud motif of the original, redrew the logo and standardized the existing colour palette. They also designed custom typography for the brand—both a script face and a text face. The script typeface was based on handwriting used on wrapping paper created for the original restaurant. The text face was based on Italian pasticceria packaging from the same decade. It integrated seamlessly into its uptown

location on the traditionally more affluent Upper East Side of Manhattan, but it is interesting to note the response when an incorrect chord is struck. In the west village further down town the effect of its arrival was described by one critic as being “a little startling, like having a flamingo suddenly turn up in a familiar old chicken coop.”⁸ Meaning is lost or created in a triangle of dialogue between consumer, designer/client and place.

Some work based on historical styles may appeal on a generational level for both designers and consumers. At least one empirical study links collectors of 1960s memorabilia with a sort of inheritance of parental memory—that is, they are interested in that period because of it being their parents' generation.⁹ Furthermore as Lowenthal asserts, our attachment to childhood things says more about the vividness of experience in childhood: it is not the past we mourn here but a lost sense of immediacy.¹⁰ It might be possible to suggest then that some of our attachments to style are activated by memory, or indeed that style itself might activate memory.

Either way, the meanings rooted in a generational attachment to period style have to be important. Posters created by Unreal for the Capital Age Festival—a celebration of London's mature population—use mid-century styles that would have been familiar to the intended audience in their youth and so are clear demonstrations of this. GBH designed the First Day Cover presentation pack and related material for the Tin Toys Special Stamps issue in the UK in 2004. The designers wanted to recreate the halcyon days of tin toy manufacturing paying homage to the packaging design of Dinky, Corgi and Hornby amongst others. For many, this recalls the world of Ladybird 'how-to' didacticism, which at present enjoys a major revival, and through this a sense of Britishness in particular.

Templin Brink's identity for Target Archer Farms used the logo as a starting point, reiterating it in die-cut windows, shapes and patterns that serve to cut through the cluttered food retail packaging environment. The children's food packaging features animal characters constructed from the same shapes and could well be intended to appeal to parents of young children who would have grown up with similar graphic styles in the 1960s. Another form of this can be seen in a more widespread thirst for reproductions of toys or 'come backs' of popular sweets from the periods

8. Platt, A. <http://nymag.com/listings/restaurant/sant-ambroeus/>, April 12, 2003

9. Gregson, N. and Crewe L. *Second Hand Cultures*, (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

10. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Culture*.

encompassed by the childhoods of today's parents—here in Ireland the Avoca shops are a clear example of this.

Designers themselves are not exempt from such a generational attachment. In his analysis of retro design, Meggs suggests that designers born in the 1940s and 1950s may have carried early visual impressions into their design work.¹¹ Neal Ashby's design for the invitation for The Art Directors Club of Metropolitan Washington may well trigger childhood memories for many of us. The designer refers to his own childhood associations: "Maybe it's the eight year old in me, but I'm always drawn to those touristy popsicle vans at the mall in Washington, D.C. I love the way the popsicles are advertised..." and on finding them at a distribution centre Ashby says he "felt like a kid in a candy shop, but then, I was..."¹²

Critiques of retro work frequently dismiss its quotation of style as lazy thinking, and a deviation from the problem solving nature of good design. As one commentator has suggested, its critics see the use of style as an "empty formalism" which is false and meaningless in its looseness of attachment and ignorance of original context.¹³ It is now widely accepted in the fields of communication and consumption generally and revivalism in particular that styles hold a variety of meanings among a diverse and active audience in everyday life. So cutting through an apparent looseness of attachment to style and aesthetic is the likelihood of contested meanings in how these are read by designers and consumers alike. As shown by some of this work, retro type and typography demonstrate an expansion of the range of styles designers have been looking to, the use of parody as a means of viewing the past, a concern with the local or the character of specific places and generational perspectives. These may well be intertwined with meanings related to gender, class, culture and personal experience.

The evocation of physical or material characteristics has also emerged as a significant strand in retro type. By this we mean work in which designers reproduce a sense of the authentic object, either by focusing on graphic forms that are defunct, old-fashioned or otherwise anachronistic, or by indicating age through the imitation of patinated surfaces. One avenue for designers to orientate consumer attention on the authenticity of a product is to create associations between it and things that are 'old fashioned.' A sense

11. Meggs, P. A *History of Graphic Design*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998).

12. Dermody, B. and Breathnach, T. *New Retro, Classic Graphics, Today's Designs*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 209

13. Blauvelt, A. 'In and Around: Cultures of Design and the Design of Cultures,' *Emigre* 33, 1995. <http://www.emigre.com/Editorial.php?sect=1&id=24>.



of the quaint bureaucracy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is at the basis of Oxide Design's stationary for North Sea Films. Building simply on the company name, the designers looked to maritime documents, to what they described as their "idiosyncratic typography" and to calligraphic handwriting.¹⁴ Letterpress printing was used to extend the 'authentic' feel of the work. The wine Henry's Drive Reserve Shiraz is named after a real nineteenth-century figure who owned a mail coach service which stopped on land now used by this company. Rather than simply designing a wine label, Parallax produced a bundle of postal ephemera, fastened to the bottle with a rubber band, reproducing the aesthetics of postal franking and fine handwriting. The use of special techniques such as die cutting

Ashby Design, 'Dream Big' invitation. Client: Art Directors Club of Metropolitan Washington

14. Dermody, B. and Breathnach, T. *New Retro, Classic Graphics, Today's Designs*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 142

and letterpress, and the choice of textured, uncoated stock ensure that the experience is a highly tactile one for the consumer. This apparent material authenticity is underlined by the inclusion of a section of enamel baked text on the bottle itself. Sandstrom's packaging for Bulleit Bourbon displays a similar concern for texture. This seeks to promote the authenticity of the product as an old family recipe. They aimed to re-create some of the primary elements associated with whisky bottle and label design—most notably perhaps the pressed glass lettering based on a rustic, 'artistic' type of the nineteenth century and the use of a decorative edge on the label. The same attraction to old printed ephemera can be seen in Parallax Design's label for Jim Barry's Silly Mid-On wine, Sandstrom's XGames poster and Atelier Poisson's programmes for the Arsenic Theatre. Each season, the form of a different everyday object is used for these programmes. For example, the use of a typewriter emphasised the idea of writing as a creative process. The designer created an alphabet drawn from typewriter keys for use on the programme and other aspects of the theatre's identity. It was not the typewritten characters per se that were emphasised here, but the form of the typewriter keys themselves. The advent of the e-book created much discussion about the death of the book as a material form. This is interesting when interpreting David Pearson's show-reel packaging and stationary design for Ridley Scott Associates (RSA), a film production company. The brief was to produce a book-like, tactile finish that would stand out from the standard plastic cases of other companies. Based on archival research, the RSA logo looks to Monotype print ornaments, and its typography is strongly traditional in a style associated with the conventions of book design. This apparent authenticity is extended by using actual letterpress printing and hand-stamping.

An extension of this strand of retro design focuses on the appearance of age or decay, a factor that is traditionally of primary importance in gauging an object's authenticity. Unreal's designs for press adverts for Raw Communications adopt the typographic vocabulary of boxing posters to promote a series of online broker debates, a play on the perception of brokers as being aggressive 'in the ring' of their profession. The punchy typographic style matches the copy perfectly: it is indeed 'raw' and 'straight.'

Parallax Design, Henrys Drive Reserve Shiraz. Client, Henry's Drive Vignerons



to signal difference by referencing anachronistic objects and aged surfaces. This is in parallel to the use of past styles, as discussed above. But we are interested here in teasing out some of the factors bound up with the basic commercial need to differentiate between one product and another. New technologies have clearly enabled designers to reproduce texture and the effects of age. But beyond this, the rapid acceleration of communication technologies means that we all conduct much of our daily lives through the screen. Could part of this concern with materiality be an expression of the need to re-instate a sense of the real over the virtual? This is perhaps true for both designers and consumers. Barrett has discussed, for example, how the material form of the word is an important experience for the consumer that goes beyond the retrieval of information and Jury has commented on the role this plays in the relationship between contemporary designers and the letterpress process.¹⁵ The patina of an old thing, real or not, holds appeal on an aesthetic level, part of a long history of preferences for the picturesque, the irregular, the accidental or the organic.¹⁶ The concept of taste as a way of displaying one's belonging to a social group, like class, might well be involved with this.¹⁷ With further empirical work, might it be possible to establish the nuances of the link between social class and preferences for retro type?

Other interpretations of the appeal of aged surfaces may also be relevant here. In encountering an actual historical object, we might imagine that we know its life, that is, the lives of those that surrounded it, that left their mark on it. The marks of its usage play a special role perhaps, in allowing us to feel that we are accessing an object's memory. Lowenthal asserts that "the worn and tattered state of treasured mementoes—battered jugs, old cigarette cards, dog-eared theatre programmes—is integral to their companionable value."¹⁸ Both abstract and empirical accounts of consumers of second-hand and 'vintage' goods support this idea, pointing to the significance of memory and imagination in how people engage with these objects.¹⁹ For these consumers, 'marks of age' are testament to the use of a thing, a life lived in other times. It is as if the object's patination, for example, allows the consumer to 'see ghosts.' Kwint suggests that, alongside other elements, we use objects to construct mental maps of our own past. Later, other objects

we encounter might well trigger memories for us. Such evocation is an unpredictable process and for Kwint it "implies an open dialogue between the object, the maker and the consumer in constructing meaning."²⁰ The object itself becomes both 'humanised' and a tangible expression of experiences that remain just out of reach.

It would seem that Benjamin's seminal thesis on the auratic quality of original artworks also applies to old things: old things carry a powerful aura.²¹ Of course, the objects that interest us here are not the real thing—they simply imitate its effects. But as Lowenthal argues, it may be that the fake inherits some of this aura.²² The idea that the eye replaces touch as a way of experiencing patination is central to our understanding of how the consumer might engage with some of the retro type we have outlined above, which might appear textured but is in fact flat.²³ Although our sensory experiences are divided—we hear with our ears, we see with our eyes and so on—they become part of a more general experience of the way our body interacts with the world around us. Our consciousness regulates these experiences.²⁴ The senses, Stewart argues, are a boundary or threshold between our internal selves and our external environment. Is it possible that consumers, whilst understanding that retro type and typography are imitations, still respond to them in some of the same ways they do to original things? Is it true that type, typography and perhaps design more generally might set in trail journeys into one's own memory and stimulate our imaginations with regard to the experiences of others?

This paper has considered two of the principal strands of retro type and typography as we see them. One of these focuses on the quotation of style and its relationship to parody, the concept of the local and generational identity. The other shows the emergence of an attachment to the material world, through the appropriation of anachronistic things and the depiction of age. Both are linked to the use of an aesthetic associated with 'hands-on' processes—handwriting, letterpress and so on. We have discussed them here as separate entities, but in reality these strands are intertwined and layered.

Criticisms of retro design are often based on its superficial use of style which demonstrates a lack of regard for original context. We see this as being bound up in a particular view of postmodernity. According to this

20. Kwint et al. *Material Memories*, 2 – 3.

21. Benjamin, W. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions,' in Durham, M. G. and Kellner, D. M. *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

22. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Culture*, 242.

23. Stewart, S. 'Prologue: From the Museum of Touch,' in Kwint et al. *Material Memories*.

24. Ibid. 19.

15. Barrett, T. 'The Future of the Book as Viewed from Inside a Tornado,' in Bierut, ed. *Looking Closer 2*. Jury, D. *Letterpress: The Allure of the Handmade*, (Hove: Rotvision, 2004).

16. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Culture*, 148.

17. Bourdieu, P. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by R. Nice, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1984)

18. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Culture*, 149.

19. Gregson and Crewe, *Second Hand Cultures*. Kwint et al. *Material Memories*. Barrett, 'The Future of the Book,' Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Culture*. Samuels, *Theatres of Memory*.

view, revivalism is simply another tool to achieve brand authenticity. This is often designed to appeal to a nostalgic impulse, regarded by its critics as a negative retreat from the present, which can only result in inauthentic experience. In our view, this is an incomplete analysis, at odds with a more nuanced and grounded understanding of consumers and, for that matter, designers, as active makers of meaning. These meanings occur within real world parameters and according to the resources that are available. The development of technologies used to design and access type are likely to emerge as important factors here.

An authenticity beyond that referred to in brand building jargon might also be at play. Rather than see 'retro' as nostalgic fakery, we might consider it as a way of negotiating the dislocation and rapid acceleration of change we have experienced in late modernity. Our production and consumption of retro design may well be a reflexive act that both registers discontent and attempts to replace something that is lost to us using the means presented to us in everyday life.

Perhaps we should look beyond the objective in-authenticity of this theatre of memory, and shift our focus instead to the authenticity of feeling that it might produce in us. Our discussions should be less about the 'real thing,' and more about the 'real me.' Could it be that we achieve some sense of our own authenticity through the catalyst of retro type and typography? The challenge now will be to pin down the complexity of this engagement in specific contexts.

Based on a paper delivered at the ATypI conference Dublin, September 2010